Belle Gunness, the Lady Bluebeard: Symbolic Inversion in Verbal Art and American Culture

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> Attention to negative or anomalous cases also is indispensable to understanding the determinants of cultural roles. [Louise A. Tilly, "Social Sciences and the Study of Women"]

In *Women Who Kill,* Ann Jones notes how carnival blossomed in the tracks of turn-of-the-century mass murderess Belle Gunness of LaPorte, Indiana (1859–1908?).[1] The disinterment of the decomposed bodies of the men who had answered the immigrant farm woman's matrimonial advertisements and were now buried in her farmyard became a tourist attraction in the spring of 1908. Excursion trains from Indianapolis and Chicago brought sightseers with picnic lunches to join the crowds of local residents who had walked from town or from surrounding farms to watch the excavations. Food vendors, hawkers of picture postcards, and sellers of the paperback thriller *The Mrs. Gunness Mystery: A Thrilling Tale*

Research in LaPorte, Indiana, 1975–76, was funded by an Indiana University Women's Studies grant and a doctoral program grant-in-aid. Follow-up research in 1981 was funded by Wayne State University's Summer Faculty Research Award. The present paper is a revised and enlarged version of a paper presented at the Seventh International Congress of Folk Narrative Research, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1979. I am thankful to the *Signs* reviewers for their helpful criticism and to anthropologist Barbara Babcock, whose book *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* has been a source of inspiration as indicated by the title of my paper. The epigraph is from Louise A. Tilly, "Social Sciences and the Study of Women: A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (July 1978): 163–73.

1. Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980), pp. 129–39.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1983, vol. 8, no. 4]
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of Love, Duplicity and Crime made profits while the county sheriff became a virtual circus ringmaster.

Jones's analysis suggests that the public in 1908 turned a psychopathic woman into a sideshow freak and, in so doing, "domesticated the fiend" by converting her butchery of potential husbands into just one more exhibition at a county fair.[2] Jones assumes here that social art, created through the group manipulation of a deviant woman's image, has conquered the social chaos implicit in multiple murders. Her assumption is valid but stops short of the complex possibilities relating art and society in this case. The murderess's movement out of brutality and into cultural performance has not been as simple, fast, or complete as Jones proposes.

If I can push the notion of performance beyond the 1908 carnival to a more generalized concept of an aesthetic communicational event that is culturally recognized, then Belle Gunness performances are still current.[3] They do not have the long history, the international distribution, or the political variation noted in the cults of the Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc or in the myths of Eva Perón, for example.[4] They do not even have the national currency given to the folk legends and rhymes, the plays and films about another American murderess, Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts.[5] In fact, the audiences for the Gunness presentations have dwindled from the international ones who saw the small city of LaPorte "put on the map" in 1908 to subsets of the local community who attend periodic reenactments of the Gunness show.

Investigation of these performances is justified because they grapple with just the kind of negative or anomalous case that Tilly finds culturally illuminating yet absent in much of the social science literature on women. Barbara Babcock agrees with Tilly's assessment when she notes in her introduction to *The Reversible World* that many studies of symbolic processes have also failed to focus on the importance of negation in communication systems.[6] Performance events about the mass murderess, in repeatedly attempting to convert a woman's violence into art, have made the negative a central issue for performers and audiences. Participants have explored the ability to negate through the figure of a

2. Ibid., p. 137.

3. See Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance,* Series in Sociolinguistics (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1977), pp. 3–51.

4. See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); and Warner's *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); J. M. Taylor, *Eva Perón: The Myths of a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

5. Joyce G. Williams, J. Eric Smithburn, and M. Jeanne Peterson, eds., *Lizzie Borden: A Case Book of Family and Crime in the 1890s* (Bloomington, Ind.: T.I.S. Publications, 1980).

6. Barbara Babcock, ed., "Introduction," in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society,* Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 13–36.

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disordered woman and so have explored the cultural codes that order their lives and the cultural roles they deem appropriate for women.

In this paper, I will analyze three performance types in the Indiana community. Each successive occasion for verbal art that I discuss tends to pull the actual woman farther out of history and push her closer toward story. In story, the murderess becomes a negative cipher, a symbolic inversion of the cultural values, norms, and codes commonly held to be operating within the community setting.[7] Like the figure of the unruly woman in literature and festival that Natalie Zemon Davis has outlined for early modern Europe, the Belle Gunness figure ultimately reveals the hierarchical patterns in family and society.[8] Yet the image of the murderess is more ambiguous, uncertain, and complex than the preindustrial one Davis describes, precisely because the social, economic, and political milieu of the industrial and postindustrial Midwest is itself fragmented. If anything, the Gunness image highlights the transitions and contradictions within and differentiated attitudes toward behavioral and expressive patterns in our late modern life.

The Ogress and Courtroom Narrative

The November 1908 LaPorte County Circuit Courthouse was the setting for one of the earliest and most influential creations of the Gunness image, even though the mass murderess herself was never brought to trial. Her farmhouse had burned down in the early morning of April 28 the preceding spring. The charred remains of a decapitated woman and of three children, presumed to be those of Belle Gunness and her son and daughters, were found in the ruins. It was only a week later, on May 5, that the dismembered bodies of her victims were first discovered in the farm woman's pig pen. Ray Lamphere, the hired hand Gunness had dismissed two months before the April fire, was tried, however, on charges of arson and murder of his former employer and as an accomplice in her murderous acts.

Although American cultural categories for verbal art normally distinguish "chronicles" or "testimonies," such as those presented in court proceedings, from "stories" or "cultural fictions," the performatory aspects of *The State of Indiana* v. *Ray Lamphere* (November 9–25, 1908) have been well noted. The storytelling techniques of the prosecution and the defense, and later of the jury, made Belle Gunness so palpable that "the

7. Ibid., p. 14. Babcock defines "symbolic inversion" as "any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political."

8. Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," in Babcock, ed., pp. 147–90.

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imaginative could again see the menacing figure of the vanished murderess" standing beside the defendant.[9]

I would like to focus on the dramatic narrative of one of the star witnesses for the state, Asle Helgelien, whose brother Andrew was Belle Gunness's last known victim.[10] Asle's November 16 testimony had a two-part structure that pivoted around the axe murder of his brother on Gunness's kitchen table the night of January 14, ten months previously. In the first part of his narrative, Asle talked about Andrew's life as a South Dakota rancher before his January 2 departure to meet the rich, Indiana widow with whom he had been corresponding for a year and a half. Although the brothers had worked adjoining farms and were on good terms, Asle had known nothing of Mrs. Gunness's love letters to Andrew at that time. In the second part of his narrative, Asle spoke of his growing concern about his brother's unexplained absence. He described his March and April correspondence with Gunness in which her evasive answers to questions about Andrew's whereabouts and her veiled allusions to Ray Lamphere's jealousy made him suspect foul play. He talked about his arrival in LaPorte just after the April fire and the discovery of his brother's mutilated body, the first of at least twelve and possibly many more found in fragments on the Gunness premises in early May.

Asle Helgelien's statement was key within the courtroom context. It changed the nature of the audience, for women returned in great numbers to hear his story, though the court had barred them from attending, and a clergyman had denounced their presence as well.[11] And it changed the nature of the trial verdict. Designed to present evidence against the defendant Lamphere by implicating him in Andrew's murder, the testimony actually proved beneficial for the defense by showing that Gunness was a woman capable of inhuman acts of deception. If she could write over eighty love letters to a man she later dismembered, then

9. See Bauman (n. 3 above), pp. 11–14; and Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 141–68, esp. 146–50 for discussions of the categorization of speaking into nonperformance and performance from an ethnographic viewpoint. See Lillian de La Torre, *The Truth about Belle Gunness,* Famous Crime Trial Series (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1955); and W. Lance Bennett, "Storytelling in Criminal Trials: A Model of Social Judgment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64, no. 1 (February 1978): 1–22, for presentations of courtroom action as dramatic and verbal art. As the court transcripts for the Lamphere trial are now missing, I am depending on these sources: the November 1908 coverage in the *LaPorte Argus-Bulletin,* drawn from the private collection of Martin Barlag, LaPorte, Indiana; de La Torre's *The Truth about Belle Gunness,* which uses the primary legal documents as source material; and de La Torre's 1952 unpublished interviews with eyewitnesses. I am deeply grateful for de La Torre's and Barlag's material.

10. A November 17, 1908 *LaPorte Argus-Bulletin* headline reads: "State Offers Three of the Epistles [Belle Gunness' love letters to Andrew Helgelien] as Evidence Following the Dramatic Narrative of Asle Helgelien—State Makes Progress."

11. De La Torre (n. 9 above), pp. 63, 102–3; Jones (n. 1 above), p. 139.

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she could have just as easily set up her hired man as the prime suspect in her murder. The defense had been building evidence to prove that Gunness had escaped her farmhouse fire alive, after killing her own children and planting another woman's body in the ruins. The jury was influenced by Asle Helgelien's presentation, which mediated the prosecution's and defense's positions, and reached a compromise verdict. They charged Ray Lamphere with arson but not with murder, reasoning that the murderess had sufficient cause to kill herself in order to avoid Asle's revelations of her murders. The question of her possible escape was left unanswered.

Asle's testimony is a key text here as well. It is a poignant example of an attempt to turn a savage act into art. It did not entirely succeed. In describing Belle Gunness's artful letter writing, which both conformed to and subverted the literary conventions of courtship, Asle told his courtroom audience how clever Belle was, how she was able to use terms of endearment and Norwegian references to draw his lonely brother to her. He said, "I did not know these things until long after, when the letters came into my possession and the *ogress* began writing to me" (my italics).[12] I suggest that the ogress label fused butchery and performance in ambiguous ways for the narrator and his audience. First, its "-ess" ending signaled a gender reversal of the more usual "ogre." Second, the term "ogre" contained dual meanings that connected the real and the fictional worlds. Its denotative meaning referred to a narrative code that was culturally available to most people in the courtroom: "In folklore and fairy tales, a man-eating monster, usually represented as a hideous giant." Its connotative meaning marked the metaphorical reference to reality: "a man likened to such a monster in appearance or character."[13] Man and woman, reality and fiction, merged in the label.

Asle Helgelien's testimony dramatically extended the ambiguous image carried in the ogress term. Within his narrative, Belle Gunness performed a double inversion. She turned the cruel man of myth into the cruel woman of reality. Helgelien's verbal art was not able to reverse the process back again and remythicize the monster. The murderess was not yet a freak. The folk narrative code structured the dramatic opposition of Gunness, the ogress antagonist, and Asle Helgelien, the questing hero as protagonist, for the object of their mutual desire, the victim-brother Andrew.[14] The referential code, however, bound narrated

12. As quoted in the November 19, 1908 *LaPorte Argus-Bulletin.*

13. *Oxford English Dictionary,* compact ed., s.v. "ogre."

14. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale,* trans. Lawrence Scott, 2d ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968) for analysis of the thirty-one "functions" or episodes structured into the classic folktale. Relevant functions here include: (8) the villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family; (9) misfortune or lack is made known; (10) the seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction; (16) the hero and the villain join in direct combat; (18) the villain is defeated; and (19) the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.

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events to the actual. The hero could not conquer; the ogress was not overcome; the sought-after person was not saved. Chronicle was not yet supplanted by story, and no one lived happily ever after. And so the courtroom crowd could listen in silent sympathy to Asle's personal experience account of finding and recognizing his brother's dreadfully altered head.

The Lady Bluebeard and Community Oral Histories

Although the courtroom audience was silent, townspeople did not remain silent for long. Asle Helgelien's testimony became the base for a chain of oral accounts performed in many community contexts for seventy-five years after the inconclusive trial. These narrative performances occurred in multiple, informal settings wherever LaPorte residents gathered and whenever the Gunness case or the town's history were topics of conversation. People talked and listened around family dinner tables, on front porches in summer evenings, during coffee breaks in the workday, at barber shops and church socials, and on the benches—sometimes called "liars' benches"—set on the courthouse lawn. Initially, performers were those who had special status as eyewitnesses to the 1908 events: Belle Gunness's farm neighbors, townspeople who had traded with her, sightseers at her victims' grave sites, and those who had attended Lamphere's trial. Each performer developed a specialized audience, usually family members and friends, who in turn became performers for audiences of their own.

These performances were no longer keyed to adjudication as Helgelien's testimony had been, but rather to joint clarification of the inchoate events that still reverberated through the community. Narrators, in trying to come to grips with the inexplicable presence of the murderess in their midst, created a group scenario of her interaction with the Helgelien brothers and then polished and refined it in multiple retellings. Examples from my field research show two quite different storytellers' renditions of the pivotal events leading to the discovery of the Gunness murders. Both versions have molded the events into art. One sign of this transformation of experience into story, William Labov notes, is the evaluative framework the narrator develops to orient his or her listeners to the story action.[15]

Henry Johnson was eighty-nine at the time of our interview. He had watched the bodies—"human meat," as he called them—unearthed at the Gunness place.[16] In later years, as a rural milkman, he stopped at farms all over the county and shared stories about local happenings. His

15. William Labov, ed., "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular,* Conduct and Communication Series, no. 3 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), pp. 354–96.

16. Henry Johnson, interview with author, New Carlisle, Ind., May 3, 1976.

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wife, eight children, and numerous grandchildren have formed a more intimate audience for his tale telling. He has a narrative style that exemplifies what Basil Bernstein calls a restricted code in his analysis of speech acts.[17] Johnson's evaluative comments are implicit, embedded in the dialogue among characters that carries the story action. The characters are not even named, so familiar are his audiences with the events depicted, the stories themselves, and the underlying world view. His storytelling techniques epitomize traditional rural art forms and the code for male speech in the Midwest.[18]

[*Orientation*]

She [Belle Gunness] advertised her place at $8,000. And you had to have the same amount to come and get married to her. Being a complete partner, see? Ya, they'd come there. A couple of days, they disappeared. She got their $8,000, and they'd get a hunk in the head! [Laughing] Then she'd advertise for *another* man.

[*Narrative,* pt. 1]

So another fellow [Andrew Helgelien] was going to answer her and his brother [Asle] said to him, "You'd better not." Says, "I realize what this place is." Said, "You won't live more'n two or three days."

"Aw," he [Andrew] says, "you're crazy." So he went.

He [Asle] says, "When you get there, I want you to write to me at once, at least once a week. And when you quit writing, I'll come and dig you up." So he [Andrew] just wrote him one letter and he quit.

[*Narrative,* pt. 2]

Well, he [Asle] come there [Belle Gunness's LaPorte farm] right away and asked the boys [Gunness's hired man Joseph Maxson and her neighbor D. M. Hutson], "Have you got a shovel?"

"Ya."

Said, "Any digging going on here lately?"

"Oh, yes, they buried a pile of junk right out there."

Says, "Which was the last—where was the last hole dug?"

He [Maxson] told him. He's [Maxson] digging for her, see. And covered 'em [the bodies] up. He [Asle] just dug his own brother right up!

In contrast, Maxine Ray Ford, who was sixty-two at the time of our interview, has an urbanized narrative style that correlates with Bernstein's concept of elaborated speech codes.[19] She has developed her rep-

17. Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 81, 183–84.

18. See John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail,* Yale Historical Publications, Miscellany, no. 121 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 132–33, for application of Bernstein's restricted linguistic code to midwestern male speech and diary writing.

19. Maxine Ray Ford, interview with author, LaPorte, Ind., April 3, 1976.

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ertoire through a network of oral and literary sources. Her verbal art extends beyond the face-to-face context of family and neighbors through her participation in dramatic performances, local radio broadcasting, and news reporting. Her evaluative comments are not only explicit, they form the major part of her narrative. Her style, which assumes the responsibility of glossing narrative action for a heterogeneous audience, recalls the communication skills midwestern women developed over a century earlier to form a bridge between their isolated homesteads.[20]

[*Orientation*]

But she [Belle Gunness] always specified in her letters to these men—after she advertised in the lovelorn magazines—she would specify: "Don't tell your family where you are going. Bring all your money. Sell all your property. But keep it a secret. Don't tell anyone where you're going."

[*Evaluation*]

Well, then, you didn't have a social security number and you didn't write or send telegrams. And you didn't call people up like you do now. And so these men would come here. . . . She really liked it better if you had no family at all. Then she was safe. But, you see, that's the one slip up.

[*Narrative*]

Andrew Helgelien had a brother, Asa [Asle], I believe. . . . But he came to LaPorte and he found a soft spot as he walked over the farm. And he was suspicious. I think he dug himself. I think he dug up, strangely enough, the body of his brother.

The storytellers' styles reflect the separate worlds of men and women, of town and country, that have operated in midwestern life. Yet their oral histories articulate a commonly shared cultural message that had been only partially formed in Asle Helgelien's 1908 testimony. These evaluative retellings have clarified the courtroom drama that presented the confrontation between scheming murderess and concerned brother by extending it into what Victor Turner has called social drama.[21]

The Kinship Code against Itself

The first step in a social drama involves a publicly recognized breach in normal code-governed social relations. Asle Helgelien's courtroom statement marked a code violation by contrasting Belle Gunness's sub-

20. See Faragher, pp. 132–33 for application of Bernstein's elaborated code to midwestern women's speech and diary writing; Bernstein, pp. 81–82, 136, 186.

21. Victor Turner, ed., "Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors," in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors,* Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 23–59, esp. pp. 35–43 for discussion of the four steps in the dramatic process and "Social Dramas and Stories about Them" (n. 9 above), pp. 149–56.

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versive marriage-and-murder racket with his own brotherly love. Henry Johnson's and Maxine Ford's oral histories mark the second step, that of crisis, in which the initial breach becomes coextensive with major splits in the society.

The oral histories textualize the crisis by drawing on an implicit artistic model first suggested by Asle Helgelien's use of the term "ogress" in describing Belle Gunness: that of the fairytale "Bluebeard." Although the murderess was compared to a number of mythological figures at the turn of the century, the epithet "Lady Bluebeard" (and its variations "Mrs. Bluebeard" and "Female Bluebeard") is the one that is still heard in the community. It is current, in part, because the proper name Bluebeard has been generalized and is applied metaphorically to any person who kills spouses and, in part, because of the amazing correspondence of the actual events, with sexes reversed, to the plot of the Bluebeard tale.[22]

When I asked Maxine Ford why she thought Belle Gunness was called the Lady Bluebeard, she answered, "I suppose because Bluebeard had killed so many women and she had killed so many men. I imagine they tied it in with the story of Bluebeard." The Bluebeard fairy tale has two distinct but related plots. Both variants have Bluebeard, the wealthy ogre, murder multiple wives who are sisters from peasant families. The youngest sister becomes the last wife who discovers the mutilated remains of the others. In the literary versions, known to most of us through editions of Charles Perrault's *Contes* (1697), the wife outwits the husband by cleverly bringing her brother to her aid. In the oral versions known throughout most of northwestern Europe—versions that may have originated in Norway, the birthplace of both Belle Gunness and the Helgelien brothers—the wife subdues her husband and resuscitates her sisters by putting their severed limbs together.[23]

The fairy-tale framework contains symbolic enlargements of family problems occurring in American contexts and shared by Western societies in general.[24] Ethnographic evidence about marriage points to the institutional subordination of women by men, if not cross-culturally, at least consistently in many societies.[25] From this perspective the fantasy

22. Willard R. Espy, *Thou Improper, Thou Uncommon Noun: An Etymology of Words That Once Were Names* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1978), p. 165.

23. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1946), pp. 36, 173. Thompson places these two types (type 311 and type 312 in his system of noting folktale plots) under the broad category of "Ogres and Witches."

24. J. L. Fischer, "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales," *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (June 1963): 235–72.

25. See Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Woman, Culture and Society,* ed. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 17–42; and Rosaldo's "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 389–417 for discussion on the complex issue of cross-cultural sexual asymmetry taken as a given in this report.

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about Bluebeard and his mutilated wives is the actuality of marriage writ large. The youngest sister-wife's victory over her husband through her supernatural raising of the dead is the folk narrative's fantastic solution to a very real problem.

By reversing the sexes of this fairy-tale pattern, the oral histories also invert the gender relationships and power structures normally operating in marriage. In so doing, the narratives highlight the norm by symbolically inverting it through the figure of a powerful and dangerous woman. The narratives, in focusing on the enduring asymmetry of the sexes—this time with the woman on top and the men below—illustrate the contradictions on which the marriage bond is based. Fruitful sexual union, or what David Schneider calls Americans' controlling cultural image of unity and equality, must coexist with the principle of male dominance.[26] The oral histories point to a woman who confounded that principle and so made the cultural ideology of equality an easily recognized masquerade. "Being a complete partner, see?" is Henry Johnson's ironic comment on Gunness's subversion of the marriage code, already subverted in everyday life.[27]

The folktale sister-wife-husband triangle fantastically projects real stresses between "blood" and "in-law" relationships in the kinship system that also form a contradictory base for marriage. The gender reversals in the oral histories of brother-husband-wife still pit siblings together against spouse, this time in the familiar setting of an American small town. Data for American kinship patterns indicate, furthermore, that the split between biologically related relatives and those connected by marriage is weighted. For most midwestern, middle-class, white Americans, consanguineal kin have "real" ties while affinal kin do not.[28]

26. David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account,* 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 37–40.

27. This section was informed by Mary Douglas's discussion in her *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), esp. pp. 140–58, "The System at War with Itself." Douglas discusses primitive societies that are founded on a contradiction: "if the system is one in which men define their status in terms of rights over women," the principle of male dominance can be, and often has been, subverted by other principles that protect women from physical control and allow them "to play off one man against another, and so to confound the principle of male dominance" (p. 149). Although I do not think that American society is based on this single principle, such an analysis does seem to apply to certain aspects of the kinship system and gender roles under discussion here.

28. Data come from the ongoing American Kinship Project, University of Chicago, Department of Anthropology. Publications include Schneider (n. 26 above); David M. Schneider and Calvert B. Cottrell, *The American Kin Universe: A Genealogical Study,* University of Chicago Series in Anthropology: Social, Cultural, Linguistic Anthropology Series, no. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Anthropology, 1975); Schneider and Raymond T. Smith, *Class Differences and Sex Roles in American Kinship and Family Structure* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973).

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Maxine Ford's statement that Belle Gunness "really liked it better if [prospective marriage partners and murder victims] had no family at all" shows that the proverb "blood is thicker than water" is an accepted strategy for dealing with kinship conflicts in American family life.

Asle Helgelien reburied his younger brother in sacred ground. The closest he could come to magical resuscitation was to give Andrew back his social identity through the public ritual of a funeral and the tombstone placed on his grave in LaPorte. The epitaph defines Andrew as a person who had kin relationships, and Belle Gunness as a monster who used marriage to annihilate family.

Andrew K. Helgelien
1859–1908

The Last Victim of the
Gunness Horror
Remains Found by His Brother
Asle K. Helgelien
May 5, 1908

LaPorte residents still walk out to Patton Cemetery to look at the gravestone. The words carved in its marble face form an abstract script of the marriage crisis dramatically rendered in the oral histories. The community is reminded of social paradox: marriage as an ideal bond unites families and splinters them. The figure of Belle Gunness points to the cultural strain among cultural norms and between the actual and the ideal. As such, she is a liminal figure embodying chaos.

Kinship Code versus Economic Code

When Ann Jones called Belle Gunness a "Bluebeard with a profit motive," she touched upon the web connecting marriage and economics that underlies the Johnson and Ford narratives.[29] The orientation sections of both oral histories summarize the murderess's transfer of the cutthroat tactics of business to the domestic world. Her effective blurring of the ideal boundaries that separate the private domain and the public marketplace in American cultural life is exemplified in Henry Johnson's opening statements: "She advertised her place at $8,000 and you had to have the same amount to come and get married to her. Being a complete partner, see."[30] Her actions become a metaphor for all social actions that fuse those ideal spheres. Her marriage racket is simply "the ripened

29. Jones (n. 1 above), p. 137.

30. See, e.g., Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

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fruit" of the matrimonial agencies, lonely hearts' clubs, and, by extension, the computer date-match organizations "coining Cupid's wiles," as a turn-of-the-century detective called their activities.[31] Maxine Ford's rendition of Belle's instructions to her prospective husbands, "Bring all your money. Sell all your property. But keep it a secret," functions as a warning to listeners that they must avoid the lovelorn magazines in order to save life, limb, and, not least, real estate and cash.

Belle Gunness's business acumen in converting marriage to an assembly-line production (remember Henry Johnson's "Then she'd advertise for *another* man!") sexually inverts a peculiarly American merger of love and money—the system of mail-order brides—historically practiced in frontier and immigrant settlements and currently operating through a wide network of American and foreign connections.[32] This system in turn, although antithetical to ideal courtship and marriage patterns, illuminates the economic aspects of marriage as men's exchange of women for goods and property.[33] Belle Gunness's request that suitors bring her their money is just the reverse of the dowry system that has characterized patriarchal Western societies for centuries. Her request that they sell all their property is just the reverse of legal sanctions against brides keeping real estate in their own names, in force until the implementation of the Married Woman's Property Act.[34]

The oral histories also focus on another cultural schism in the United States, that of class and ethnicity. John Mack Faragher points out that midwestern agricultural families, much like their peasant forebears, clearly saw the economic necessity of marriage for both partners, at least until the mid-nineteenth century.[35] That Belle Gunness was an immigrant farm woman is a fact often noted, especially by older narrators in the LaPorte community. As a cotter's daughter, one of the poorest classes of sharecroppers in Norway, and as an immigrant servant girl, it is possible that she understood too well that marriage was a business arrangement and the only way up the economic ladder in a land where the streets were not paved with gold.[36] That storytellers could see and

31. Jones (n. 1 above), p. 139; Clifton R. Wooldridge, "The Horrible Gunness Farm: The Ripened Fruit of the Matrimonial Agency," in *Twenty Years a Detective in the Wickedest City in the World* . . . (Chicago, 1908), pp. 119–91.

32. Material on matrimonial advertising and mail-order brides in the United States has not been easily accessible. Personal communication from the staff of the Norwegian-American Historical Society indicates that the practice of mail-order marriage was known to but not condoned by most Norwegian immigrants to America.

33. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Paris, 1949; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969).

34. Faragher (n. 18 above), p. 242, nn. 58–61, notes that Indiana had amended the common law with regard to married women's property rights by 1861 but that implementation was piecemeal.

35. Ibid., pp. 110–78.

36. Information on Belle Gunness's early life in Selbu, Norway, and her emigration to the United States in 1881 has been drawn from personal communication with Norwegian historian Kjell Haarstad at the University of Trondheim. I am grateful for his assistance.

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articulate the discrepancies between Gunness's economic ventures and her successful use of late nineteenth-century love rhetoric shows their cultural evaluation (or recognition) of the split between the elite ideology of romance and the social reality of marriage.[37] The murderess simply widened the gap.

That people often marry for money and not for love and that they often hate their in-laws, however, are cultural commonplaces. Henry Johnson, Maxine Ford, and the other LaPorte residents who talk both about Belle Gunness's murder of Andrew Helgelien for his life savings and about his brother's attempt to save him are saying nothing new. They are recounting a case history that differs in degree but not in kind. They are aligning the situation depicted to very familiar problems, to the basic social contradictions with which we must cope. By coordinating Belle Gunness's butchery with cultural inconsistencies, the oral histories, paradoxically, not only mark a social crisis but also move the Lady Bluebeard into the metaphorical realm of story. The performance of verbal art has domesticated the fiend, but only at the expense of showing participants their positions on the horns of a cultural dilemma.

The Freak and Folk Drama

The third step of the social drama is redress, the legal action taken by society members to remedy wrongs or grievances presented in the crisis situation. This usually occurs the first time that the drama is verbalized in narrative form.[38] The resulting fourth step is either a reintegration of cultural oppositions or a social recognition of cultural schism. That Belle Gunness was never brought to trial and that Ray Lamphere's trial was so inconclusive that LaPorte residents have had to clarify the situation for seven decades indicate that, in this case, the redressive action was not successful.

The social recognition of contradiction can emerge in any of a culture's traditional performatory genres. Although the oral histories defined the schism, the acceptance of disharmony only surfaced, ironically enough, through the harmony of music, song, and dance framed in community skit and ballad.[39] The performances, variously titled "The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Belle" and "The Ballad of Belle Gunness," have been presented to LaPorte audiences since Ruth Andrew Coffeen, now eighty-four, first wrote the lines in 1947.[40] The ballad text is based on a

37. Jones (n. 1 above), pp. 356–57, notes that Belle Gunness was successful "largely because she played the superficial role expected of her so well."

38. Turner (n. 21 above), pp. 141–68.

39. See Roger D. Abrahams, "Folk Drama," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction,* ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 351–62.

40. Ruth Andrew Coffeen, *Poems: A Small Legacy of Spirit and of Mind* (LaPorte, Ind., 1978).

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conscious parody of a popular honky-tonk number of the 1940s, "Pistol-packin' Mama," in which the lady gets her man in true Frankie-and-Johnny style.[41] The first stanza of the chorus serves to reinforce the connection between the two women who did their menfolk in:

> Lay that cleaver down, Belle
> Lay that cleaver down,
> Cleaver-cloutin' Mama
> Lay that cleaver down.

The ballad was sung in a minor key when performed. Ruth Coffeen recalled, "And, of course, in minor key, it *is* gruesome." When asked how audiences reacted, she said, "Oh, they loved it! They laugh. Oh, you can't help but laugh when it's sung that way you know." Descriptions of the three major performances reveal certain incongruities in this laughter. All performances were part of the town's celebratory events: the first recognized the seventieth anniversary of the Women's Literary Society; the second, an annual revue of the Little Theatre Club; and the third, the club's golden anniversary.[42]

Ruth Coffeen helped prepare a series of skits depicting LaPorte history for the town's centennial in 1932. The story of Belle Gunness was not included in this centenary pageant. When she was asked to arrange the anniversary program for the Women's Literary Society fifteen years later, she decided to include "The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Belle" because she found "it was just too good a chance to miss." The program included seven skits, each representing one decade of the literary society's history. The Belle Gunness ballad represented the season of 1907–8. Ruth Coffeen's introduction keyed the performance in an entertainment mode:

> It was during the spring of this year that an event occurred which some people say put LaPorte on the map. Ladies, I refer to none other than the spectacular Belle Gunness murder case. . . . yes, Belle Gunness, the female Bluebeard, murderess par excellence with at least fifteen murders to her credit and more to be had for the digging. Ladies, you have had her presented to you in newspapers, in magazines, in books; early this fall you had her on the radio; but never to my knowledge have you had her in music. Ladies, we give you then at this time "The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Belle" sung by the Gibson Girls Glee Club.

41. Al Dexter and his Troopers first sang "Pistol-packin' Mama," composed by Dexter, in 1943. It is a common practice for traditional balladeers to use popular tunes of the day, and often a parody of their lyrics, in their own compositions. I thank William B. McNeil, Ozark Folklife Center, for this information.

42. McLane Collection of Women's Literary Society History, LaPorte County Historical Society, LaPorte, Ind.; Ruth Andrew Coffeen, interview with author, August 20, 1975, and April 21, 1976.

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The curtain opened and the audience, made up of literary society ladies and their guests, saw eight of their number dressed in authentic Gibson girl costumes. The performers sang the ballad with deadpan faces while posed in the elegant upper-class style of the idealized American girl:

She advertised for a husband
And advertising pays
She always knew
Just what to do
For she had such killing ways.

Each suitor who came courtin'
Must first his bride endow
And then that day
Without delay
He fell for her—and how.

Lay that hatchet down, Belle
Lay that hatchet down.
Hatchet-hackin' Mama
Lay that hatchet down.

The *LaPorte Herald-Argus* society page called it "one of the two outstanding hits of the program." The other was a skit depicting a 1920s fashion show.

LaPorte's Women's Literary Society, founded in 1878, is both the oldest cultural organization in the city and one of the few survivors of the nineteenth-century women's club movement. Its founding purpose, in line with other women's study-group goals, is the mental improvement of its members in history, literature, art, and science. Its high aspirations are matched by the high status of its members. The eight women who founded the society were members of the town's leading families and, in several cases, of its founding families. Subsequent literary society members, often the daughters and granddaughters of the first, have been and are connected through bloodlines, marriage ties, or professional occupations to the highest socioeconomic groups in the city. At the time of the Belle Gunness performance in 1947, membership was exclusive in a double sense—it was extended by invitation only and in reference to social position. Author, performers, and audience represented the female aristocracy of small-town America.

That Belle Gunness could enter the inner sanctum of this culturally elite women's group and cause laughter indicates that their play world was transmuting the fiend into art and using her in specific ways. Society members' laughter fixed Belle Gunness, the code breaker, next to the Gibson girl, the code maker whom Ernest Earnest calls "the ideal whom many men expected to find someday in the flesh and blood" and who

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could be an appropriate enough projection of the women's own social roles.[43] They laughed at the anomalous yoking together of an image that subverted and an image that ideally fulfilled the gender expectations of their culture and class. Their irony domesticated the butcher by pulling her into their own social milieu where, at worst, she would only tower over men at social gatherings in artistic representations already fifty years old.

Mary Douglas writes that the dramatic juxtaposition of opposites can be deeply satisfying to participants in sacred ritual, for it allows the resulting ambiguity to become a source of power in moving out of conventional social categories. It may be stretching the point to so describe this secular performance, but through it the club women, like cult members, seemed able "to turn round and confront the categories on which their whole surrounding culture has been built up and to recognise them for the fictive, man-made, arbitrary creations that they are."[44] The image of the mass murderess and the image of the Gibson girl together gave women latitude in redefining their roles and the chance to become domestic feminists.[45]

The metamorphosis of the murderess begun in this performance continued in the Little Theatre Club's 1956–57 Revue, which was open to the public and, therefore, more representative of the LaPorte community as a whole. "The Ballad of Belle Gunness" played immediately after a selection from the musical *Carousel.* This timing highlighted the carnival world in which the murderess finally and most fully moved. In this presentation, the participants not only upended cultural categories but also subverted the dramatic and dance forms their club was pledged to uphold. The singers, barefoot and dressed in black, stared ahead, chanting the ballad in a dirgelike monotone and so parodying a Greek chorus. They created the narrative background for the Belle Gunness ballet performed on stage. Belle Gunness was played by Juanita Schnable, a local hairdresser said to be built a bit like the hefty murderess, while Andrew Helgelien was played by John Hacker, a small man who was a clerk in the local post office.

Oral histories of the performance focus on one crucial scene.[46] The chorus was singing the stanza:

43. Ernest Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction, 1775–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 228–29; *The Mrs. Gunness Mystery* (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1908) showed Belle Gunness, dressed as a Gibson girl, administering poison to a bedridden man on its cover.

44. Douglas (n. 27 above), pp. 169–70.

45. See Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868–1914* (New York: Homes & Meier, 1980) for a discussion of the variations on the feminist model explored by club women.

46. Maxine Ford, interview with author, April 3, 1976; Maxine Ford and Juanita Schnable, interview with author, April 6, 1976.

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When Andrew Helgelien came,
His check he first cashed in
And then that night
She caught him right
And he was soon bashed in.

Juanita, as Belle, had just exited stage rear. John, as Andrew, bringing a little bouquet of flowers, knocked at the farmhouse door. As he handed over the bouquet, Belle's arm shot from the wings, jerked him up and out so that his body became horizontal with the stage floor as he was pulled through the air. Cast, audience, and stage crew were amazed at the acrobatic feat that turned the incongruity of body sizes into both a visual metaphor of power and a slapstick routine.

When Andrew's brother Asa
Had written to inquire
She lost her head
And it is said
She set the place on fire.

Here Asle Helgelien is represented only by a letter sent to the murderess. His heroic role has been submerged in the folk tradition that Belle Gunness literally got away with murder. The final scene is marked by this stanza:

They couldn't find a head
They couldn't find a skull
So people said
Perhaps instead
She wasn't dead at all.

Belle moved slowly across the stage into the darkness of the wings holding a severed head under her arm. The head, ostensibly Belle's own, was immediately recognizable to the audience as one belonging to Juanita's beauty shop mannequin. This recognition juxtaposed the grotesque world of Belle Gunness's violence with the comfortable world of Juanita's beauty parlor. At that moment, the strange became familiar and so the fiend was subdued in the play world. Yet the familiar also became strange as well. The role of the woman as trickster was made available to all, and cultural rules appeared malleable—and this as "true womanhood" reemerged in full force.[47]

When Juanita Schnable said that she had to choreograph the whole production herself because none of the other theater club members knew what to do, Maxine Ford, one of the chorus, quipped, "Well, they'd never seen Belle dance!"[48] LaPorte audiences were given the chance to

47. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963).

48. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "freak." "Freak" is possibly cognate with the Old English "frician," which is "to dance."

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see the murderess dancing in successive performances, for the same cast performed the ballet for the club's fiftieth anniversary in 1975, and for several LaPorte County Historical Society meetings as well.[49] Younger LaPorte residents tend to place the mass murderess in this play framework. Steven James, eighteen at the time of our interview, provided a representative comment: "You know how circus sideshows are—'How strong is the strong man? How fat is the fat lady?' And here she was—a murderer, a freak."[50]

"The Ballad of Belle Gunness" finally turned a woman's violence into a caper and the woman herself into a living curiosity exhibited in a show. Journalist Stewart Holbrook had much the same conception of "Dear Old Belle," as she is presently called in LaPorte, when he wrote that "Belle Gunness lives on in that misty, unmapped half-world that Americans have made and lovingly preserve for certain of their folk villains. Indeed, I fully expected to see Belle pop up at Chicago's Century of Progress world's fair in 1933, complete with cleavers and a supply of quicklime."[51]

Belle Gunness, inexorably dancing decades after her victims rotted in her backyard, is Mikhail Bakhtin's "comic monster" created in existentialist laughter at social contradictions. Although Bakhtin was referring to an element of medieval laughter, his description of comic images is pertinent: "We always find in them the defeat of fear presented in a droll and monstrous form, the symbols of power and violence turned inside out, the comic images of death and bodies gaily rent asunder."[52] Like the medieval audiences, the people in LaPorte played with terror and laughed at it through the image of their own unruly woman.[53] Rather than masking deep-seated anxieties about gender roles as Ann Jones suggests, however, I think that this laughter, directed toward cultural inequities, toward community mores, and toward the self, celebrates the cultural options that awareness of social contradictions reveals.[54] The ability to negate in its most humane sense is offered to all.

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49. Information on the Little Theatre Club's anniversaries has been drawn from personal communication with Laura Z. Krentz, president, and Mr. Forbes Julian, past president. Their help is appreciated.

50. Steven James, interview with author, May 11, 1976.

51. Stewart Holbrook, *Murder Out Yonder: An Informal Study of Certain Classic Crimes in Back-Country America* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1941), p. 240.

52. I am grateful to folklorist Eliot Singer for this quotation from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Boston: MIT Press, 1968), p. 91.

53. Here I am duplicating Davis's analysis of the revolutionary use of medieval festival. Davis (n. 8 above).

54. Jones (n. 1 above), p. 138.

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